

Contemplative Methods that Help Healing

Incorporating SPIRITUAL and CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES in Jewish-Christian-Muslim Encounters

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Rationale:

Interreligious peacebuilding efforts among Jews, Christian, and Muslims usually focus on ideas from history, theology, psychology, or politics that are either held in common or distinguish and divide. Other peacemaking initiatives among adherents of the three Abrahamic faiths evoke feelings, sometimes strong passions. These emotional experiences often devolve into contentious polarizing, unless facilitated by trained and skilled group leaders.

In most organized interfaith gatherings, spiritual and contemplative practices, if considered at all, are talked about rather than engaged in, let alone shared. I submit that there is great potential, largely untapped, in sharing spiritual practices as a way to build bridges of mutual understanding and good will among faithful Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

The underlying premise is this: by experiencing the Presence of the Divine together in different ways, while remaining loyal to our respective theological claims, we may find new avenues for transcending our divisions, for discovering common ground, and for developing practical strategies for interreligious peace building.

Spiritual practices that might be included in Abrahamic encounters are:

- Verbal, articulated prayer (communal prayer and individual/solitary prayer)
- Silent meditation (communal or shared, and individual/solitary meditation)
- Exercises focusing on the breath
- Guided visualizations (e.g., on Divine Names)
- Study of sacred texts
- Chanting and song (e.g., Muslim *zhikr*), or playing selections of sacred music
- Contemplative use of beads and other rhythmic exercises (counting the Rosary, *tasbeih* prayer beads for reflecting on *Allah's* 99 Names)
- Prayerful body movement (genuflection, bowing, prostration, dance)
- Pilgrimage as a common practice, exemplified in walking a labyrinth

- Fasting and feasting (abstention from food and consecrating meals, or cooking together)
- Marking off sacred time in cycles (weekly, monthly, and annual cycles; e.g., the link between *Shabbat* observance and *Shalom*)

Examples of shared contemplative experiences:

(1) Three recordings of **sacred music**, one from each tradition, are played for a mixed group of interfaith educators and activists. The Jewish selection is *L'Olam* sung by Neshama Carlebach (from her first CD, *Ha Neshamah Shel Shlomo*); the Muslim selection is the *Adhan*, the call to prayer, intensified by a slight acoustical echo; and the Christian selection is *Kyrie Eleison* sung by the Cathedral Singers from Chicago. After each piece of music is played, the group is invited to meditate silently on the music and its message, even if the words are not understood. After about 8-10 minutes of silence, participants are offered an opportunity to share their experiences.

In my own case, listening to Christian sacred music, such as Gregorian chant, helps me to appreciate the sacred essence of Christian faith. It also helps to heal the part of me that might otherwise remain wounded, by reliving the trauma of Jewish persecution at the hands of Christians over many centuries.

(2) Another group exercise uses **LIGHT**, in this case three candles, as a common symbol of Divine Presence. A Jew lights the first candle in a three-branched candelabrum and recites two verses:

Or zarua' la-tzaddik uleyishrei lev simchah
Light is sown for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart.
*Psalms 97:11

Barkheinu avinu kulanu k'echad b'or panekha
Bless us, O God, all of us as one, with the light of Your countenance.
*Amidah prayer, last benediction

A Christian lights the second candle and recites these verses from Luke 8:16-17:

No one after lighting a lamp hides it under a bushel, or puts it under a bed; instead he puts it on a lamp stand, so that those who enter may see the light. For nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not become known and come to light.

Finally a Muslim lights the third candle and recites these verses from the Qur'an, *Surat Al-Nur* (The Light) 24:35, in Arabic and then in English:

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His light is as if there were a niche containing a lamp; the lamp enclosed in glass; the glass [shining] like a brilliant star: lit from a blessed tree, an olive tree that is neither of the East nor of the

West, whose oil is well-nigh luminous even though fire had not touched it: Light upon Light! Allah guides unto His light the person who wills [to be guided]; and [to this end] Allah propounds parables to human beings, since Allah alone has full knowledge of all things.

The group members are then invited to meditate for about 10-12 minutes, either looking at the flames or closing their eyes. At the end of that period, the following poem from T. S. Eliot's "The Rock" (Chorus X) is read by the facilitator:

O Light Invisible, we praise Thee!
Too bright for mortal vision.
O Greater Light, we praise Thee for the less;
The eastern light our spires touch at morning,
The light that slants upon our western doors at evening,
The twilight over stagnant pools at batflight,
Moon light and star light, owl and moth light,
Glow-worm glowlight on a grassblade.
O Light Invisible, we worship Thee!

We thank Thee for the lights that we have kindled,
The light of altar and of sanctuary;
Small lights of those who meditate at midnight
And lights directed through the coloured panes of windows
And light reflected from the polished stone,
The gilded carven wood, the coloured fresco.
Our gaze is submarine, our eyes look upward
And see the light that fractures through unquiet water.
We see the light but see not whence it comes.
O Light Invisible, we glorify Thee!

In our rhythm of earthly life we tire of light. We are
glad when the day ends, when the play ends; and ecstasy
is too much pain.
We are children quickly tired: children who are up in the night
and fall asleep as the rocket is fired; and the day is
long for work or play.
We tire of distraction or concentration, we sleep and are glad
to sleep,
Controlled by the rhythm of blood and the day and the night and
the seasons.
And we must extinguish the candle, put out the light and relight
it;
Forever must quench, forever relight the flame.

Therefore we thank Thee for our little light, that is dappled
with shadow.
We thank Thee who hast moved us to building, to finding, to
forming at the ends of our fingers and beams of our eyes.
And when we have built an altar to the Invisible Light, we may
set thereon the little lights for which our bodily vision

is made.

And we thank Thee that darkness reminds us of light.
O Light Invisible, we give Thee thanks for Thy great glory!

Group members can then express what they learned or gained from this experience.

(3) A guided meditation based on **Genesis 25:9**:

The participants are invited by the facilitator to place pen and paper next to them, to assume comfortable positions—either on the floor, on meditation cushions, or on chairs with straight backs—and to breathe deeply for several minutes, releasing tension from each part of the body (the toes up to the head are mentioned slowly, as participants are invited to let go of the tension held in one area after another)...

Facilitator: “Keep breathing deeply as you go on a journey through time and space, back through the centuries, across oceans and continents, until you reach the land of Canaan some 3500 years ago. The climate is hot and dry, the sun is shining at mid-day, and you find yourself near a small cave. You hear muffled voices from inside, and you walk slowly toward the mouth of the cave to hear better. Now you can make out two voices in conversation, the voices of two grown men. You are curious, so you step inside the cave, standing near the opening. Now you can see, in the dim light, the figures of two men, standing next to a newly dug grave. From the conversation between them, you learn that they are half-brothers, one named Isaac, or Ishak, and the other named Ishmael, or Ismail.

They are talking about the man they have just buried together—their common father Abraham, or Ibrahim. They are also talking about their respective mothers, Sarah and Hagar, or Hajer. And they are talking, also, about the relationships that each of them had with their father, and their mothers, and with each other.

You listen closely to what they say, how they describe these family relationships over many years, and how each feels about the father each has just lost.

Stay in that attentive listening mode for several minutes, hearing their words and taking them in, trying to discern the feelings in the words and how they reflect the relationships between these two sons and between the two of them and their deceased father...”

After about 12-15 minutes, the facilitator gently invites participants back to the room and to an awareness of the present moment, opening their eyes when they are ready. They are then asked to write what they heard, and, if they wish, to draw images of what they saw. After another 10-12 minutes, participants are invited to share what they have written or drawn, either all together or in small interfaith groups, depending on the number of participants.

Conclusion:

The writer Yossi Klein Halevi, a Jerusalem resident and author of *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden: A Jews' Search for God with Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land*, has this to say about interfaith relations in the Middle East, with implications for all of us:

If the religions of this region cannot produce people who, in the nuclear era, are capable of offering a vision for saving humanity, then all three Abrahamic traditions have outlived their usefulness. It is easy to be pessimistic, listening to the official spokespeople for the religions. But, fortunately, there are deeper sources of spiritual strength and renewal in each of the faiths that can be tapped. We need to move from conferences and intellectual dialogues to a dialogue of the heart, of prayer, of meditation. We need to bring God into this conflict, because only God has the power to create the kind of miracles that can save us. When people of different faiths, especially in this Holy Land, pray or meditate together, my sense is that the effort is greater than the sum of their separate prayers. Joining different languages of prayer together, when they are too often pretexts for conflict, can reverberate and draw God's protection and active intervention, in a way that is more powerful than when each faith community prays on its own.¹

¹ Quoted in Yehezkel Landau, *Healing the Holy Land: Interreligious Peacebuilding in Israel/Palestine*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, September, 2003 (research monograph No. 51 in the PEACEWORKS series, accessible online at www.usip.org/reports). Halevi's book was published by William Morrow (New York) in 2001, with a paperback edition (subtitled "A Jew's Search for *Hope* with Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land") issued by Perennial, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers (New York), in 2002.